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General Stephen Watts Kearny's Trail from the New Mexico Border to San Carlos

by Tom Jonas



Stephen W. Kearny

On September 25, 1846, an army of 300 American soldiers marched out of Santa Fe along with wagons, cattle, and support personnel on its way to take California from Mexico. General Stephen Watts Kearny, whose "Army of the West" had occupied Santa Fe without firing a shot on August 18, commanded the force. Guiding the column were Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau (born to Sacagawea during the Lewis & Clark Expedition), and Don Antonio Robideaux. Notable members of the expedition were Captain Henry Smith Turner (General Kearny's Adjutant), Captain A.J. Johnston (Aide De Camp), Dr. John Strother Griffin (Surgeon), and Lieutenant William Hemsley Emory (Topographical Engineer), all of whom kept diaries of the journey.

Kearny's route was down the Rio Grande and then across to the Gila River - the most direct route known at the time. At Socorro, New Mexico they met Kit Carson with 15 companions on his way to Washington with a news express that Fremont and Stockton had taken possession of California. General Kearny ordered Carson to guide him back to California and sent the Express on to Washington with Thomas Fitzpatrick

As they continued down the Rio Grande, Carson advised the General that there would be very rough terrain ahead that was virtually impassable for wagons. The general decided to send back all of the wagons and 200 dragoons to Santa Fe and bring a smaller occupation force of 100 on to California. The baggage was transferred to pack mules and they rode on down the Rio Grande with the only wheeled vehicles being 2 howitzers. They left the Rio Grande near Truth or Consequences, NM and headed west, reaching the upper Gila River at the mouth of Mangas Creek on October 20th, 1846.

On October 22 they camped on the bluff above the river at Canador Peak, near Virden, New Mexico. The next day, following the Gila River, they crossed the present-day border of Arizona. Their first Arizona campsite was about 2 1/2 miles northwest of Duncan on the north side of the river. Lieutenant Emory, who wrote the official report of the journey, says:



Gila River and Canador Peak

"Last night the heavens became overcast, the air damp, and we expected, for the first time since leaving Santa Fe (a month to-morrow,) to have a sprinkle of rain; but, at 9 this morning, the clouds



had all been chased away, and the sun careered up in undisputed possession of all above the horizon."

Captain Turner wrote two weeks later:

"It is quite cloudy this evening, threatening rain, but it won't – I know it won't – it cannot rain in this country."

On the way to this camp on Oct 23 Emory mentioned the first major Indian ruin they had seen on the Gila, and observed signs of Beaver, Deer, Geese, Quail, Teal, and Wolf. They stayed in the Duncan camp 2 nights to allow their mules to recruit.

On October 25 they set out again northward along the right (or east) bank of the river. Emory records an exciting illusion on this day:

"We were now approaching the regions made famous in olden times by the fables of Friar Marcos, and eagerly did we ascend every mound, expecting to see in the distance what I fear is but the fabulous 'Casa Montezuma.' Once, as we turned a sharp hill, the bold outline of a castle presented itself, with the tops of the walls horizontal, the corners vertical, and apparently one front bastioned. My companion agreed with me that we at last beheld this famed building; on we spurred our unwilling brutes; restless for the show, I drew out my telescope, when to my disappointment a clay butte, with regular horizontal seams, stood in the place of our castle; but to the naked eye the delusion was complete. It is not impossible that this very butte, which stands on an imposing height in the centre of a vast amphitheatre of turreted hills, has been taken by the trappers, willing to see, and more especially to report, marvelous things for the "Casa Montezuma."



In April of 2002 I was driving north on Arizona Highway 75, roughly paralleling Emory's trail when, off to my right I saw the castle! Like Emory, I was convinced this was a man-made structure. Only a look through the binoculars could convince me otherwise. The "castle" is visible east of the highway about 1½ miles south of Apache Grove.

The army traveled about 20 miles that day, passing the place where Highway 191 now crosses the river on its way to Clifton. Kearny's camp that night was on a hill north of the river about 2 miles west of Guthrie Station. They were approaching the area known today as the Gila Box. Carson told them the canyon ahead narrowed down and became impassible at some places so Kearny decided to take a detour through the mountains. This would turn out to be the most difficult day of their entire journey from the United States to California.

I'll let Captain Turner describe the country on this trail. His diary entry for October 26 says, in part:

"I shall not attempt to describe the route we have passed over today. I have no language to convey even a faint idea of it. Could we have foreseen so much difficulty it would have been better to have retraced our steps 20 miles, to have taken another and more practicable route. From the moment of starting until we dismounted at our present camp, our poor animals were stepping over and among rocks of great size – some fixed, but most of them loose, and then the steep hills and gullies were very frequent. We were in the saddle about 8 ½ hours, and marched we supposed 16 miles."



Emory says:

"The men named this pass 'the Devil's Turnpike,' and I see no reason to change it."



A few months ago I visited this area to try to determine the army's route through the Black Hills. I was fortunate enough to meet David Subia, whose family has lived in this area since the 19th century. David showed me an old trail through the mountains that begins at the bridge of the old Safford road and cuts through the mountains on the north side of the Black Hills Byway. He calls it the "Tipover Road." I didn't follow it for obvious reasons. I have mapped an approximation of this road across the mountains to Deadman Canyon Road and Bonita Creek. The length of this route matches Kearny's diarists estimates of 16

miles from their last camp.

Carson and other guides usually led their charges along existing Indian trails as they traveled. These roads provided the advantages of following the easiest route between two places, and usually passed the most dependable water sources along the way. Therefore, it's likely that the path Kearny followed through the Black Hills evolved from an Indian trail to a military road, to a local access road that has now fallen into disuse.

While they were struggling through the mountains Lt. Emory and Capt. Johnston both mention the tributaries entering the Gila from the north. Emory writes:

"Those on the north side swept in something like a regular curve from our camp of last night to the mouth of the San Carlos, deeply indented in two places by the ingress into the Gila of the Prieto

(Black) and Azul (Blue) rivers. Those on the south, where we passed, were a confused mass of basalt and trap..."



If you're familiar with the rivers in that area you've probably noticed that the names Emory mentions are not the names we use today. He calls today's San Francisco River the Prieto, Eagle Creek the Azul, and his San Carlos , where they camped, is now Bonita Creek. When they got to today's San Carlos River, 70 miles downstream, they called it the San Francisco. These names continued to be somewhat interchangeable until around 1870 when maps began to consistently show the names we use today.

To let the men and animals recover from the toil of the march and allow the stragglers to catch up, Kearny stayed here two nights. Stragglers and the howitzer detail continued to arrive in camp on the 27th and party was sent out to rescue one poor mule that was trapped on the edge of a cliff in sight of camp. Emory describes the Gila River at the Bonita Creek campsite as being 70 feet wide and 4 feet deep. On this layover day the men took the time to explore the Bonita Creek Canyon and ruins and get in a little hunting and fishing. On the following day, October 28, they left camp at 7:45 and were clear of the mountains in about 2 miles. They traveled along the south bank of the Gila for about 21 miles that day, camping on the south bank of the river due north of Thatcher.

Expedition artist John Mix Stanley drew a picture (right) of Mount Graham from their campsite. I looked for a view along the river that includes the high banks in Stanley's drawing but could not find it. Apparently, features such as these banks were obliterated when the land was leveled for farming and irrigation. Other victims of land leveling were the extensive Indian ruins up and down the valley. Kearny's diarists all mention several large ruins in the valley, some of which are now unknown. Even early archaeologists who visited the valley around 1900 commented that many important ruins had already been destroyed.



Probably the largest ruin mentioned was at the mouth of the San Simon Creek near Solomon. Captain A.R. Johnston writes:

"Further on, we came to a large plain at the junction of a creek which comes from the southeast; and here was found the remains of the most extensive settlement; most of the houses had cedar posts in a state of decay, standing in the ground; a rampart had been raised in a circle of over 300 yards, and on parts of it, houses had been made; in the middle was a hole with three entrances or slopes down to the bottom of it; probably an old well filled up, as the surface was probably not over 15 feet above the level of the river; pottery very abundant."



Captain Turner estimated the former population of the

valley at "not less than 12,000."

On October 29 the army continued north along the river. The road was excellent, although they all mention how dusty it was. Somewhere between Pima and Fort Thomas they crossed a major trail coming from the southwest and crossing the river into the Gila Mountains. Captain Turner says:

"After marching about 8 miles this morning we fell into a large trail leading from the direction of Sonora, diagonally across the river to the range of mountains, which cover its north side. This trail appears to have been much traveled, and is doubtless the main route by which the Kiataro Indians, who live in that range of mountains, take the horses, mules and cattle which they steal from the inhabitants of Sonora."

This trail apparently came through Eagle Pass, between the Pinaleno and Santa Teresa Mountains, near the location of today's Klondike Road.

The army marched about 22 miles that day and camped on the river near Geronimo. Continuing on the next day, Lt. Emory mentions "turning the base" of Mount Turnbull at today's Navajo Point near Bylas. The army's livestock was now getting pretty decimated and they were hoping to find local Indians who could trade for fresh stock. Finally, just before reaching camp, one of the guides surprised two Indians. Lt. Emory relates the fruitless encounter:

"As Robideaux unarmed was riding in advance, he emerged suddenly from a cavity in the ground, thickly masked by mezquite. He had discovered two Indians on horseback within twenty yards of him. The interview was awkward to both parties, but Robideaux was soon relieved by the arrival of the head of our column. The Indians were thrown into the greatest consternation; they were tolerably mounted, but escape was hopeless; ... They were armed with bows and arrows, and one with a quiver of fresh cut reeds. Neither could speak Spanish, and the communication was by signs. They were directed to go with us to camp, where they would receive food and clothing; but they resolutely refused, evidently thinking certain death awaited them, and that it would be preferable to meet it then than suffer suspense... Our anxiety to communicate to the tribe our friendly feeling, and more especially our desire to purchase mules, was very great; but they were firm in their purpose not to follow, and much to their surprise... we left them and their horses untouched."

Their camp that evening was at the mouth of Sycamore Gulch in what is now upper San Carlos Lake.



Kearny's October 31 campsite in the San Carlos Valley north of the Gila River. Tom Jonas photo.

The next day, October 31st, they reached the San Carlos River (Emory's San Francisco) after 9 miles and camped on the San Carlos, about 2 1/2 miles north of its mouth where they found good grass for the animals.

We'll leave Kearny's army here as they prepare for another difficult mountain crossing. It will take them 24 more days to reach the Colorado River crossing at Yuma. After crossing the Imperial Desert, Kearny found that California was in the throes of a revolt against her American conquerors. Of the people I've mentioned today, Captain Johnston was killed and General Kearny and Robidoux the guide were seriously injured just a few weeks later in the Battle of San Pascual, California.



Although they were not the first Americans to cross Arizona, their crossing was the most important one up to that time because of their military objective, their scientific studies, and perhaps most of all, Lieutenant Emory's map and report, which for the first time accurately described the southwest to the world.

Here is the eastern Arizona section of Lt. Emory's groundbreaking map:

